

NOT MADNESS  
(Sanna)

July 22, 1985 Notes on Ronald Aronson, The Dialectics of Disaster: A preface to hope.

--"Madness, said Nietzsche, is the exception in individuals, but the rule in groups." Daniel Goleman, Vital Lies, Simple Truths, p. 161. (Then quotes Freud, Group Psychology and the Analysis of the Ego, on people in groups regressing to an infantile state as a consequence of membership (leaders, too? Kelman's hypothesis. Freud supposed, regression to son/father Oedipal relationship: I suspect, son/Mother pre-Oedipal relationship). (Le Bon, on crowds. And look up: "Rumour, Fear, and the Madness of Crowds.")

Aronson describes "madness" as, in part, a radical rupture from reality, a departure from "rationality." But I suspect he is misleading in treating "rationality" as equivalent to what he elsewhere calls, "reason."

"The whole of this study may be read as an essay on reason in relation to politics. Throughout this essay I have argued that to be rational [he might better say, "reasonable"] to day still means to be free from drastic illusions, to use logic in the service of life, and to overcome dissociation between thought and the world being thought about--with all its terrors, its obstacles, its limitations. [and its demands for perfection and success, its rivalries, and conflicts and incentives for threats and "credibility," its occasions for regret and reproach!]. The hallmark of reason, today, is respect for reality." p. 274

Values?  
Ques,  
constraints,  
priorities

But departure from reality may be functional, instrumental, successful, for groups in conflict and especially for individuals within groups, especially those competing for leadership roles!

This involves not only unrealistic fears, but unrealistic hopes! (And are not the hopes that Aronson pursues and posulates as unrealistic as any hopes or fears he criticises?! And do they not reflect similar incentives: if not leadership, then the necessary energy, elan, morale, integration, within a group: in this case, the "movement"? Also, success in a conflict situation.)

The modern "revolution of rising expectations" applies not only to the oppressed and subordinated classes and national groups, but to the population--and the elites!--of dominant, exploiting, privileged nations! Expectations of continued and enhanced/absolute control, and of resulting privileges and benefits; expectation of the continuation of privileged positions (that may reflect more transient circumstances: victory in war, weakness of rivals, good weather, an upswing in the Kondratieff cycle...). It is these expectations that may put heavy pressure on elites to continue to deliver success and prosperity: what may amount to an "impossible demand, an insoluble problem" of the sort that Aronson suggests leads to (a) a rupture with reality, and (b) quasi-"solutions," magical reliance on extreme violence or



preparations for it. The latter may simply represent "desperate choices" for leaders caught between two sets of "unrealistic hopes": those of their own followers, cadre and population (and rivals, who fan these hopes and offer their own solutions) for successful control and benefits; and those of previously-subordinated Third World populations who not only hope but expect to "catch up" in terms of material standards and prestige and dignity, and are prepared to risk or suffer death to help their nation and children achieve this, having learned from Marxism or from examples that this radical improvement is possible given a willingness to use violence and self-sacrifice.

An ability to share, to express unrealistic hopes, and to promise fulfillment ("sincerely") is a great advantage, and may even be a requirement, for leadership of large hierarchies: and this precisely in desperate times, when "reality" does not offer to satisfy such hopes. In such times, "realistic"--"sane"--candidates for leadership are at a disadvantage in competing for position; and indeed, if they did take office (Carter) they might not be able to rule effectively, or hold their constituency together or mobilize the energy for needed projects. Here is Reagan's advantage: it is what he communicates--hope, confidence, energy--not merely that he could communicate "anything" effectively.

This consideration adds to the list of "incentives to unrealism/madness" (rather than "to irrationality," since "rationality" in the technical sense of decision theory is compatible with any degree of departure from "reality" and from "concern for human life, and its quality"). (Aronson, Tom Powers and EP Thompson all analyze the current nuclear predicament in terms that make any but the faintest hopes look wildly unrealistic, or as Aronson would say, "mad.")

All the incentives "not to know, to be unaware or ignorant, to believe erroneously, to hold to illusions" contradict the decision theory axiom (Marschak, Value of Information) that "all information has non-negative value," "it can't hurt, or be disadvantageous, to know or learn something, since at worst the information can be ignored in decision-making." To the contrary: some knowledge may undermine the basis for hope, for confidence, for self-esteem (a positive self-image), identity, integration; all of these may be disadvantageous in seeking leadership roles in a hierarchy, in competition with others. Likewise, information may make it harder to make credible threats, to wield power effectively in an organization or against adversaries. It may make it harder (because lying or concealing may be "harder," and less effective than "sincerity") to profess faith in certain favorable outcomes, to be "optimistic," to project a sense that one knows what the group policy should be, that one can and will protect the group from certain harms.

The bombing of Vietnam reflected, in part, a public and elite belief that the Vietnamese "ought" to yield, eventually, in face

of demonstrations of US overwhelming (destructive) power: especially in light of our possession of nuclear weapons (Kellen) . It was, in face, an expression of "restraint," to be using high explosive instead of nuclears. The very possession of the bomb--given the magical expectations that various Presidents have encouraged in the public, not only when we are avowedly ahead, but by their expressions of anxiety at the possibility that Russians might draw even or surpass us--puts an obligation on the President to succeed against any challenge, by any means necessary, since at worse he could use the bomb. (If an opponent fails to back down, this can only be proof, in the public's eyes, that a President has failed to communicate expertly and convincingly his willingness to use any means, including nuclears. And if the President doesn't believe that himself--which he may well (Nixon)--and doesn't think even the public believes it, he can nevertheless expect that rivals for leadership will arise in the context of frustration and failure to assure them that it is the case (as Nixon was on the verge of doing in 1968, till LBJ left the race; and as Reagan did after 1976).

After Vietnam, the "belief" that the US can safely and effectively control the world, dominate any situation, can be maintained only by believing that US leaders failed skillfully to persuade opponents of their willingness to use all our destructive power, to "unleash our troops" (as Rambo suggests, "to let them win": this is either absurd, or is a euphemism for permitting them the kind of terrorism used in El Salvador by our side, or a euphemism for the use of nuclear weapons). But this belief has been the coin of American political rivalry for office, since 1945. Occasional experiments by Presidents with emphasis on "limits to power" (JFK, Gov. Brown, Carter) have not encouraged emulation.